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ABSTRACT

A study to investigate the significance of teacher decisions concerning the social and physical dimensions of the Open Classroom was conducted. Preliminary observation reviewed teacher goals and decisions for the Open Classroom. This research is based upon Hall's theory of culture reflecting the communication model. There are five basic structural components in the theoretical model of decision making: (1) the period of decisions, (2) the locus of activity, (3) the interactive phenomenon involving the above activity, (4) the composite of decisions forming a pattern, and (5) the consequences of the decisions. The point is made that the levels or criteria of decision making directly affect the structural components of the teacher decisions and that the levels or criteria of decision making are represented by the policy goals, technical goals, and the institutional goals of the curriculum. The preliminary phase of the research included observing and recording classroom phenomena in the naturalistic situation. Goals centered around the essence of the educational philosophy in the open-concept classroom and learning routine order and providing several options for children. It was found that the teacher is faced with four basic questions concerning the decision for use of Group Meetings: Why it is necessary to have a meeting; What it is for; How the process will be selected; and When would be the most effective time to use the particular Group Meetings. (Author/CK)

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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF OPEN CLASSROOMS*

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THE PROBLEM

A number of public elementary schools are in the process of changing from the Traditional to the Open Classroom approach. In the Traditional Classroom, the teacher assumes the role of the controller while the pupil assumes the role of the controllee within the constraint of a relatively fixed physical environment. The change to the Open Classroom requires shifts in the social as well as the physical environment. Control arises in the Open Classroom through the interrelationship of subjective qualities of the teacher and pupil within the social context (Macdonald, 1970). These significant transactions lead to a change in the cultural environment of the classroom.

This new cultural environment results in unique kinds of curricular decisions and teaching patterns. The belief and value systems of the decision makers, both adults and children, take on additional significance in the Open Classroom. There have been a number of attempts to describe the Open Classroom involving decision making. The ETS Interim Report, Analysis of an Approach to Open Education (Bussis and Chittenden, 1970) infers the significance of teacher curricular decisions by suggesting the following characteristics of open teachers: provisioning for learning, reflective evaluation of diagnostic information, diagnosis of learning events, and the guidance and extension of learning. In discussing the criterion for curricular decisions in the Open Classroom, Macdonald emphasizes the concept of the "person" as contrasted to the "individual" behavior change:

> The curriculum decision making is focused upon the goodness or rightness of the decisions made in relation to the person. Its beginning point is what is right, now, for the person. The learning experience itself must have inherent worth for the person, not in terms of some eventual behavior change, but in terms of its moral quality in the present (Macdonald, 1966).

These characteristics and concepts, involving the curricular decision making by the teachers, require further study in order that the new educational settings may be described through replication and analysis. The present research is an attempt to develop a method of describing the Open Classroom as a microculture by designing observational categories that can be used generally and which can lead to further analysis and the testing of specific hypotheses.

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THE THEORETICAL MODEL FOR ETHNOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

This research is based upon Hall's (1959) theory of culture reflecting the communication model. Subsequent insights have been gained from studies by Louis Smith (1967, 1968) in his ethnographic investigations of the classroom. The theoretical model for the analysis of teacher decision making in this study has both structural and dynamic attributes.

Structural Attributes

There are five basic structural components in the theoretical model of decision making (see Figure 1). These components include (1) the period of

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decisions, (2) the locus of activity, (3) the interactive phenomenon involving the above activity, (4) the composite of decisions forming a pattern, and (5) the consequences of the decisions.

The period of decision is represented by the concepts of preactive and interactive (Jackson, 1970). The preactive period involves teacher decisions while preparations are being made before the children arrive for the school day. The preactive decisions may include the provisioning for specific activities or plans for special projects. The interactive period includes decisions while children are present. These comprise decisions dealing with the diagnosis of learning events, and the guidance and extension of learning.

The locus of activity represents the specific activity setting from which a number of teacher decisions may evolve. During the preactive period, the locus of activity might be the teacher's decision to use a "group meeting." A number of additional decisions may evolve from that activity. In the interactive period, the locus of activity may be the on-going "sandbox play and teacher dialogue" focused on guidance of that activity.

The interactive phenomena represents the various media through which the teacher may communicate the limits or non-limits of the locus of activity. The media focusing on a specific activity during the preactive period may define the restrictions for the use of space, time, material, and human resources. For a spatial example, Unit Block Play may be used only in a specified area while puzzles and math games may be used in other areas such as on a number of tables or on the floor.

The pattern of decisions represent the above components of the locus of activity and the interactive phenomena. The evolving pattern may indicate a particular propensity towards the specific locus of activity. However, it may-be the combination of several locus of activities and the respective patterns which will theoretically provide the ultimate informal pattern of communication.

The decision consequences represent any pupil behavior occurring as a direct result of the teacher decision involving the specific locus of activity. This may provide some measure as to the anticipated as well as the unanticipated outcomes of the teacher decisions.

The levels or criteria of decision making directly affect the structural components of the teacher decisions. The levels or criteria of decision making are represented by the policy goals, technical goals, and the institutional goals of the curriculum (Spodek, 1972). The policy decisions deal with the long range purposes and goals of education. These decisions are potential values or value indicators which give direction to the life in the classroom. An example of a policy goal might be self-initiation of activities. The technical decision may deal with the immediate short range goals. Specifically these involve the process of developing "skills" and "concepts" for learning activities. The institutional decisions refer to the maintenance of standards, roles, and rituals of the educational institution. These decisions may be the result of tradition and the district standardization of the use of materials, time, space, and human resource.

Dynamic Attributes

Dynamic attributes refer to the interrelationships among the parts of the decision making process components and the levels of decision making. The selection of the Unit Block Play, how the blocks are used, when they can be used and for how long, where they can be used, and who can use them are structurally discrete but dynamically interdependent components because all are influenced by the levels of decisions. Also, all other activities in the classroom are dynamically interrelated with every other activity resulting in a large, overall pattern. These patterns, projected by the same teacher, theoretically shape the non-verbal pattern which is implicitly communicated to the child. Ultimately, it is this covert, private side of the public act (Birdwhistell, 1970; Denzin, 1969, 1970; Goffman, 1956, 1963) which this study is attempting to reveal.

THE METHOD FOR OBSERVATION

The preliminary phase of research included observing and recording classroom phenomena in the naturalistic situation. Field notes were collected in two periods: preactive and interactive. The preactive period included the planning period by the teacher before the children's arrival for the day. The data collection involved an interview with the teacher regarding her purposes and descriptions of the contrived environment. The interactive period involved the period which the children were present and interacting with the classroom environment. The data included the sampling of events concerned with the effects of the decisions made by the teacher. An additional third postactive period (Spodek, 1969) included the period immediately following the school day. The data involved the interview with the teacher and a critical examination of the sampling of events relative to the specific area of the contrived environment observed.

THE SETTING

The observations took place at the Booker T. Washington School in Champaign, Illinois. Descriptive data of classroom events were collected from three primary classrooms. Within each class, the approximate age range was two years which included classes of 5 to 6 years, 6 to 7 years, and 7 to 8 years. The social-economic levels were varied. The Washington School is currently a laboratory school at the University of Illinois but staffed and maintained by the Champaign Public Schools.

Figure 1

Theoretical Model

Decision Components	Specific Characteristics of the Component Decision	Levels or Criteria for Decisions
(1) Period of Decision	Preactive, Interactive, Postactive	
(2) Locus of Activity	The Specific Activity (Unit Block Play)	Policy, Technical, Institutional
(3) Interactive Phenomena	An Interactive Phenomenon (How material or blocks can be used) Other phenomena: use of space, time, human resource	Policy, Technical, Institutional
(4) Pattern of Decisions	Pattern of the Locus of Activity (Pattern for Unit Block Play)	Policy, Technical, Institutional
(5) Decision Consequences	Anticipated Consequences	
	Unanticipated Consequences	

Introduction

Although it was important to describe the ways teachers selected the materials and organized the physical settings, it was the primary purpose of this study to investigate the significance of teacher decisions concerning the social and physical dimensions of the Open Classroom. The potential hypotheses gathered from the observations will provide ideas for further study.

This preliminary observation and analysis will review the following: (1) interviews with teachers concerning long and short range goals for the Open Classroom; (2) decisions for the use of dialogues; and (3) the decisions to supplement materials and activities. Figures 2, 3, and 4 are included to show the percentage of use of activities and activity areas based on 30 observations of the three classrooms.

I. Goals

Long-Range Goals: In the initial interview, a general agreement was expressed among the three teachers as to the essence of the educational philosophy of the open-concept classroom. This philosophy was evident in comments such as: a situation where many materials for choice are provided so you can observe their ability to do the work; to develop independence and responsibility; an atmosphere where children feel free to follow or pursue their own interests; the teacher has to set the stage and gradually work toward the situation where children are working independently; and the classroom is a space for living and learning. One unanimous long-range goal which seemed evident was the factor for autonomous learning.

In the analysis of the above interview data, the teachers agreed on the long-range goals of developing responsible, autonomous learners. This is encouraged by providing a rich environment with activities so arranged that children can pursue their own interests. A statement of a tentative hypothesis might suggest that the three open-concept teachers tend to agree on long-range purposes and processes.

Short-Range Goals: Some of the initial short-range goals were: learn routine order and experience simple activities; provide several options for children; activity areas should include art, writing, reading, and math; and grouping children according to needs in specific skills. It was felt by the teachers at the beginning of the year that the teacher and pupils definitely needed what one teacher called a "hidden structure." The "hidden structure" suggests an implicit language which is understood by the members of the class. This provides the basic routine for order in the classroom. Although there was a verbal agreement as to this need, the "meeting of minds" ended here. Each teacher's beliefs and style guided them towards their own unique techniques, methods, and other means to reach short-range goals.

The basic concern for short-range goals was to provide routine order, develop a system for the arranging of activities, and grouping children according to the needs in specific skills of reading and math. The divergence of short-range goals within common long-range goals further suggests that styles and beliefs of the teachers provides the impetus for the unique qualities for each of the three classrooms. When the short-range goals were agreed upon by all of the teachers, the analysis suggests a tentative hypothesis that teacher beliefs and styles determine the character and tone of the classroom.

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II. Dialogue

To help discover meaning through the self-selection of activities, a constant and flexible dialogue was carried on between the three teachers and the children. Although there were several variables affecting the qualities of the dialogue, purpose was the most significant characteristic. The purpose of the dialogue depended on the type of topic being discussed. If the topic was analytical in nature, then the dialogue followed a tone of a technical "clarification." The teacher made several subtle attempts to clarify a situation for the child by: (1) asking him a question which suggests alternative ways to arrive at the same conclusion; (2) reviewing the procedure or steps in the work done by the child; (3) reminding the group or individuals of the long-range goals in the project being attempted; and (4) helping to anticipate problems. Another purpose of the dialogue was that of "extension." When the child felt he couldn't go any further in an activity, the teacher extended the child's activity to other alternatives in the situation.

It also appears that the type of experience, either "first hand" or "vicarious," affected the nature of the dialogue. The degree of loquacity in the quality and quantity of questions and comments regarding the topic of discussion, depended largely on whether the experiences were first hand or vicarious. For example, a dialogue took place while two children were looking at a picture and a diagram. The teacher joined the dialogue, presumably to clarify the technical nature of the material. The quality of the teacher's questions not only attempted to elicit answers but also challenged the pupils for imaginative and creative responses dealing with specific details. The transaction as a whole was dominated by the adult.

The first-hand experiences provided a degree of loquacity which was less intensified with the use of key words and good timing. The nature of the first-hand experience required more involvement which was of primary importance. Talking became secondary. First-hand experiences such as planting, experimenting in science, and cooking with simple recipes, limited the need to verbalize with a guiding adult. The transactions appeared to be guided by the degree of interest shown in the activity itself. Questions and comments of the teacher were generally open-ended. The teacher also guided the interaction toward a closer examination of the experiments to facilitate inquiry and further discovery.

The dialogue resulting from first-hand experiences need to be investigated further for its effect upon the child and how it helps continue his on-going activities. We also need to look at how teachers become opportunists in such situations. Two transactions might be: from a dialogue of first-hand experience to a suggestion of some kind of writing experience; and from a dialogue of a writing experience to a suggestion of a first-hand experience.

Another crucial aspect of the dialogue was related to the concept of "opportunism." This was the teacher's timely or untimely suggestion that the child move into another level of experience, i.e., that the child write something about his first-hand experience and/or that the child create something from the story he had just read. On what basis did a teacher make "on-the-spot" decisions such as these? This depended on whether or not the child had exhausted all of the other possibilities for alternative experiences. The teachers also considered the child's potential specific to the topic being experienced, the materials readily available, and the assessment of the value of what he was doing in terms of his immediate needs. In other cases, the teachers were pressed for "time" when many individual projects occurred simultaneously. The decisions by teachers in these cases are crucial and more study of this type of dialogue is needed.

The participation and/or intervention into the activity by the adult may have an effect on the on-going activity. When children are playing for the sheer "fun of it" and a dialogue ensues between teacher and child, the quality of the dialogue generally depends on "who" initiates it. If the child initiates the dialogue, it may indicate the child's desire for the teacher to become involved in the activity. Whether the nature of the dialogue is positive or negative appears to be inconsequential. The point is, the child wants the adult to become involved in the activity. In one example, a child troubled herself to come half way across the room to invite the teacher into her play house activity. The teacher made an inquiry about the nature of the soup and became a role-playing participant. The ingredients of the soup, the recipe, and the writing experience all became part of the teacher's role as a participant and at the same time, guider of the activity.

If the "teacher" initiates the dialogue into the activity, the intervention may become external to the on-going activity. Also the extent of the interaction would depend largely on the value judgments made by the teacher concerning the intervention affects of the children involved. For example, several boys were quite involved in their play activity. The teacher attempted to engage in a conversation with the individual boys. The dialogue was limited to short questions and answers. The teacher's questions were of exploratory nature--to find out what they were doing and to see if some dialogue could result from the transaction. There were no overt pressures by the teacher to open up a dialogue or to become involved.

In summarizing the style of the dialogues, several determining factors may influence the direction of the transaction. First of all, the purpose of dialogue may be that of clarification and/or extension. In either case, the purposefulness becomes a "direct-act" to sway the course of the activity. The subjective value judgments on the part of the teacher becomes crucial. There needs to be further study on how these judgments by teachers do affect the transactions and in this case specifically that of clarification and extension. There are other variables which may direct the course of the transaction through the dialogue. These are the "first hand" and the "vicarious" nature of the experience in the activity, the opportunistic approach to move a child onto another experience, and "who" initiates the dialogue, the teacher or the child. These vairables may be important indicators which influence the quality of dialogue and determine the nature of the transaction.

III. Decisions to Supplement Materials and Activities

The materials and centers for learning can be physically arranged before the children arrive. However, one cannot assume that this arrangement alone will provide the children with the motivation to become involved in a productive experience. The teacher provides additional sources or supplementary information. Rather than tell about the new information, the teacher can make provisions for experiences which are imaginative and thought-provoking. Some uses are to invite resource people from the current teaching staff and the community, the parents, and the various industrial and institutional concerns around the community. The teacher can provide additional information outside of her classroom by taking field trips and assigning small groups to other classrooms or resource rooms. Another crucial aspect is to allow children a share in this responsibility of supplementing activities by having group meetings. Although the function of group meetings differ throughout the year, they also vary according to specific purposes or needs of the group.

The group meetings are an essential component of the classroom as each child brings with him individual experiences which he can share with others. Finally, there are the groupings of children by achievement and by interest.

In one class, the teacher had been working with those children showing special interests in the bird study. The discussions had flowed over into the group meetings held by the entire class. The decision to invite the "Bird Lady" as a resource person was done in cooperation with the entire classroom. The decision for the "Bird Lady" to use the "lecture approach" may have been the only way under the circumstances of a short-term guest speaker. What would have been interesting was to see the effects of a cooperatively-planned experience by the class, teacher, and the resource person in a meeting several days before the resource person got involved with the class. The teacher and the resource person could have had a brief conference on the general philosophy and physical set up of the class to provide the resource person with a background for teaching consistency. Here is an instance where value decisions may have an important impact on the quality of the transactions. The process of implementing the use of the resource person involves crucial value decisions.

A number of important questions come to bear upon the above discussion. How does this resource person affect the children and their work? Does it result in extended studies on the specific aspects of science? Have they expanded their ideas to other concepts? How does this affect the various media of expression, i.e., painting, poetry, story telling, creative writing. What can be done about controversial topics. i.e., keeping birds in cages, trimming pet birds to keep them from flying, and discussing hunting birds as a sport? How can the teacher facilitate to broaden the spectrum of ideas as the resource person supplies additional information? What are some of the significant decisions that maintain interest among the children after the resource person leaves?

When the science "specialist" became a resource person, often the science experience followed a formal pattern. The specialist had specific materials available and suggestions for use. The children took advantage of "messing about" but as soon as they messed too much, the experiment often did not reach the stated goal. When the children followed the proper procedure, they were able to detect with fair accuracy, the goals of the project. In a sense, the experiment was informal since the children could leave the experiment at any time. Anyone could try the experiment as long as there was space. Some stayed only a minute or two and others stayed and never left. This resource person differed from the previous one (Bird Lady) in that the science specialist was not there to tell but assisted the children in inquiry and discovery.

Parents, especially in this University community, are excellent sources for supplementary information. On several occasions, parents were used to provide information for small activity groups. They shared hobbies such as rock polishing and sewing.

As a resource person, the parent represents a unique individual amongst resource persons in general. The parent not only has a personal investment in the classroom but also an interest in learning about Open Classrooms. On the other hand, the parent generally comes with limited experience concerning educating young children. However, the parent is a "special" resource and this presents a situation for more in-depth study in the Open Classroom, a contrast from the science specialist and the authority on bird study.

In analyzing the implementation of the activity involving the parent, a teacher selected group was formed and it was relatively closed to the rest of the class. The nature of the activity and the limited experience of the resource person dictated this formal situation. The content of the activity, as presented by the parent, limited the variability in the procedure and method of approach. The value of the interaction between the participants depended a great deal on the quality of the dialogue and the learning processes involved, i.e., following directions and measuring.

In summarizing the concern for resource people, three different types of resource persons, methods, and effects of the special activity were discussed and analyzed. No doubt there are many more good examples to be found. However, the significant factor to be studied further is the value decisions made by the teachers in dealing with the variety of resource persons who subsequently will affect the quality of the transactions that occur between the participants in the classroom activity. More specifically, how the teacher's decisions affect the quality of the preparations for the resource person, the decisions on how to implement the activity, and finally the decisions on how to follow-through with information provided by the resource person, will determine the positive effects of the resource person.

Grouping of Pupils was used frequently in the Open Classrooms. One basic question was the value decision to use grouping as the best mode of communicating. Another question was which group procedure was best to achieve the objective of the group. In the analysis of the observations, three types of grouping of pupils were examined: group meetings by the entire class; achievement groupings; and interest groupings.

Group Meetings: Group Meetings by the entire class were used for a variety of reasons such as preparing them for organization of the classroom, introduction to new projects, special events, and discussions on specific topics. The basic reason for Group Meetings was to bring the variety of feelings, opinions and ideas to bear on a particular subject or problem concerning the group as a whole. Even if the subject or problem was not of concern to the whole group, usually it was the decision of the teacher to provide an opportunity for the pupils to discuss, listen, and lead in the direction of the activity in a topic that might be foreign to them. The frequency of meeting times during the day early in the school year might indicate: the need by the teacher to insure that proper foundations were laid for routines; orientation to the activity areas in the room; attitudes concerning work; and, providing time for sharing ideas and materials.

In one example, the class assembled around the teacher's desk without being told where to sit which indicates the specific use of space. It also appeared evident that there was a decision made previous to this as to how and when these group meetings should be held. The formality of the seating arrangement seemed to provide orderliness, overt attentiveness, and little physical distraction. The children were seated on the floor in what appeared to be three rows facing the teacher who sat on the chair in the front. The subsequent discussion on attendance and counting was an example of opportunistic behavior on the part of the teacher. Frequently the teachers showed a child's work to the group to discuss possible alternatives or new ideas to provide incentives for the child to complete his work. These decisions to encourage "finished products" required sensitivity on the part of the teachers toward the individual children. Perhaps the child does not have any interest or does not

intend to pursue the topic and as far as he is concerned, the project is finished. The situation on occasion requires a dialogue and an opportunity for choice by the child. The suggestion by the teacher that there are "new things around the room" provided the children with a chance to observe quietly and then, discuss their reactions about the new items which they might not have otherwise noticed. This also gave the teacher an opportunity to suggest her possible motives for including new or novel activities and displays.

In another example of a group meeting, a teacher reminded the children of the unfinished work left over from last week. She discussed the correct spelling of words and where these words could be found throughout the room. A "shell display" discussion not only highlighted the boy's contribution to the classroom but suggested interesting projects which could be drawn from it. Since certain activity centers were limited to the number of participants at one time, the teacher used the group meeting to select and assign interested children. The teacher's decision to use an "indirect reward" to select only those children who had already finished their work, made an interesting value decision. This provides a point of study as the value decision conflicted with the long-range goals of the classroom. This decision also depended on the frame of reference of the decision maker, the conditions, and circumstances of the situation. The teacher acknowledged the fact that the child had a choice of finishing or not finishing his work. According to the teacher, the prerequisite for not finishing was for the student to "krow why their work was not worth finishing." This added another value decision on the part of the teacher. What was a good or bad reason? If it was a matter of degree, where was the cut-off point?

The above two examples occured early in the year. The indications are that the teachers were attempting to set standards for work habits, took every opportunity to develop incidental learning, and encouraged pupils to look for alternatives. There were many value decisions by the teachers during the group meetings in the early part of the year because pupils tended to be more dependent. Later during the school year, the group meetings became a child-centered activity, with growth towards autonomy. Group Meetings also appeared to be more frequent early in the year particularly when the children were not certain of their individual responsibility. In the later months, the teachers continued to remind children of unfinished work. In looking at the style of teacher statements, they appeared to be subtle suggestions rather than direct demands for children to follow-through with, i.e., the charts or math problems. The teachers also used the group meeting to plan for a project still in a distant future. The needs for the play, the sharing of the seed, and the food project were all technical aspects of future projects or programs.

Some Group Meetings had specific purposes and problems to solve. Teachers, at times, found it necessary to ask children for a cooperative effort to discuss a particular problem. For example, a teacher decided a "cooperative party invitation" for the parents would be better than a ditto letter by the teacher. Using the overhead projector the teacher was able to write the children's verbal contribution. The teacher guided the essential content of the letter by asking questions dealing with important details of the party. Most of these efforts by the teacher were value decisions related to the language arts skills.

One final example of a group meeting was the efforts of the teacher to allow the children to direct their own group meeting. The teacher attempted to guide related ideas of the respective child's presentation which initiated verbal discussions between the child who was presenting the project, the children in the audience, and the teacher who sat in the back of the room.

Any unique aspect of the project, i.e., the "double weft" in the weaving, was discussed. Also the sequence of the procedure for the project was brought to attention. Questions for the class, to emphasize keener perception, were pointed out.

In summary, a teacher is faced with the four basic questions concerning the decision for the use of Group Meetings. Why it is necessary to have a meeting in the first place, what is it for, how the process will be selected, and when would be the most effective time to use the particular Group Meetings. The significance of the Group Meeting must not be overlooked in view of the fact that many value decisions originate at this point.

Another common concern for teachers centered on individual differences for achievement and interest. One way to deal with this was to use small groups.

Achievement Groups: In an attempt to meet the wide differences in reading, the teachers formed a formal reading group ranging from two to eight pupils per group. Each teacher devised their own techniques based on some formal application of the basal text, phonetic and structural analysis. The groups either met near the teacher's desk, in the reading corner, or when noisy, in the hall. This structure of formal reading usually demanded the undivided attention of the teacher but inevitably interruptions occurred due to the few children not yet able to work independently. Just how effective are formal reading groups within an "unstructured" environment? A more significant question is whether or not this formal grouping was consistent with the long-range goals for the classroom.

Interest Groups: Grouping has also occurred through common interest in an activity. This was usually necessitated by the limitation of equipment and materials. In other situations, the demand for the activity was too great and as a result, only a select group could be working at one time. Often-times, special projects such as cooking, preparing birthday cookies, and specific science experiments dictated a limited number of participants.

In summary of "grouping for achievement and interest" depended a great deal on the value decisions by teachers. There are some questions as to the need for formal groups. While in other cases, the grouping approach appeared to be an integral part of the classroom organization.

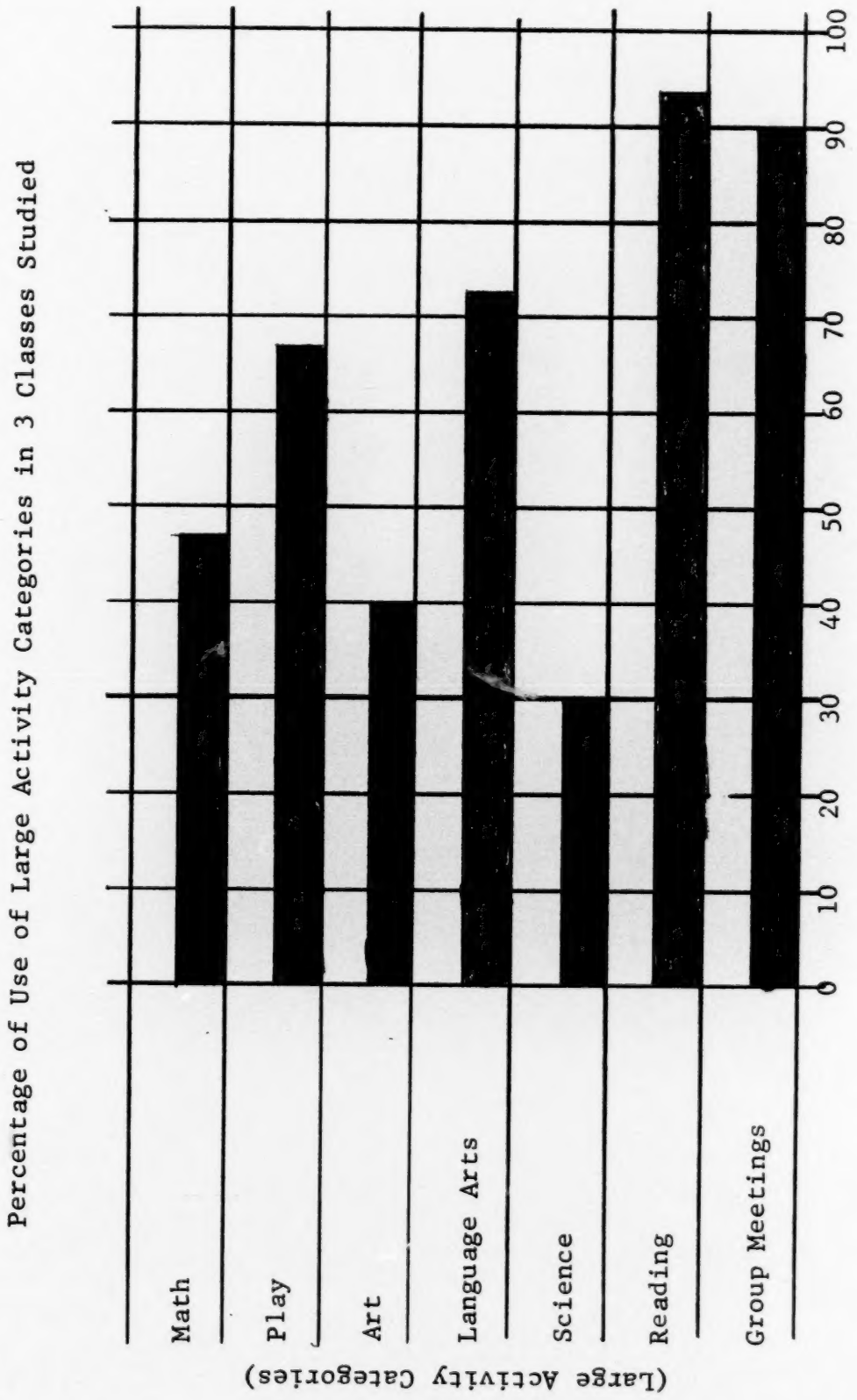


Figure 2

Percentage of Use of Large Activity Categories in 3 Classes Studied

Figure 3

A Specific Activity Broken Down to 5 Types of Play from Figure 2

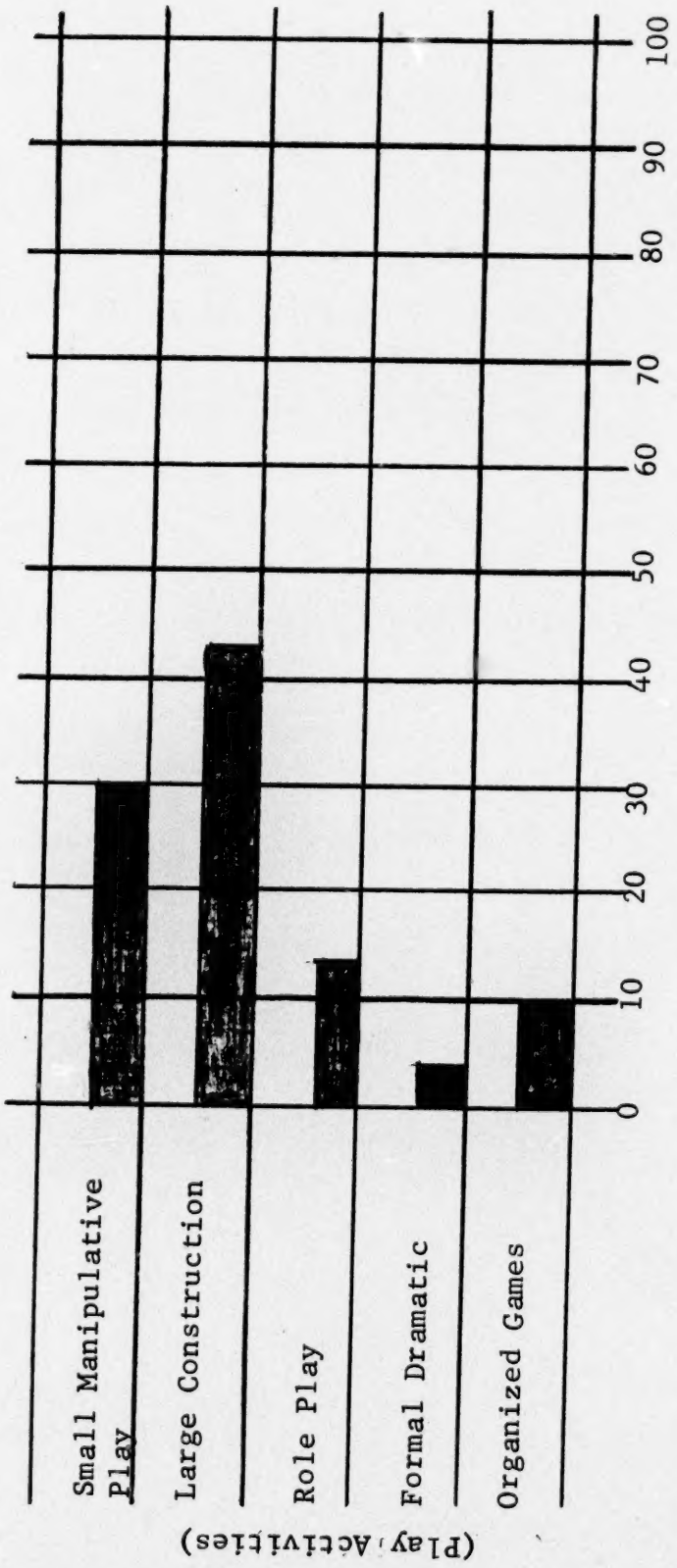
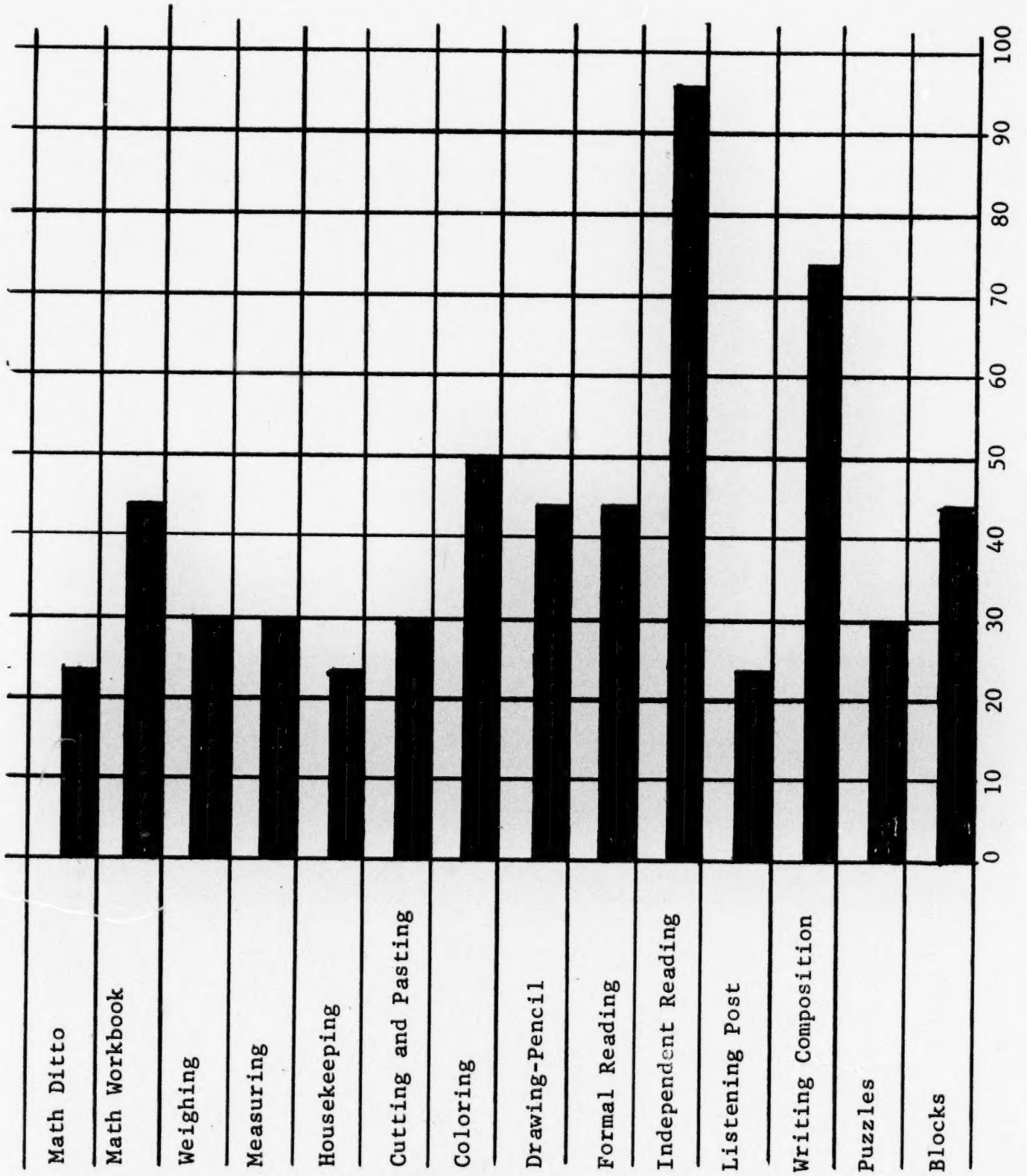


Figure 4

Percentage of Use of Activities in 3 Classes Studied



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